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Boeing Commercial Airplane Group's International Relief Delivery Flight Program celebrates its fifth anniversary this month.

The program, which delivers food, medical supplies, clothing, books, blankets and bandages to hurt, hungry and homeless people the world over, is a partnership between Boeing, its airline customers and relief organizations. The program grew out of a desire to use the space aboard often-empty delivery flights for humanitarian purposes.

For years, Boeing worked periodically with relief organizations and airline customers to deliver supplies to far-flung parts of the world. But in 1992, the company developed a full-time program committed to this humanitarian cause.

The key to fulfilling the program's mission is the ability to use the empty space on airplane delivery flights - flights where a customer has picked up a new jetliner and is taking it home.

After gaining approval from the airline, a relief agency provides an inventory of the goods to be shipped, packages the supplies for air transport and delivers them to the Boeing Delivery Center in Seattle. Boeing then loads the supplies aboard the airplane, and the airline transports the supplies - usually to the customer's home base, but sometimes to a destination en route. The relief agency meets the airplane, clears the relief supplies through customs and distributes them.

The first relief mission was organized in October 1992, using a TACA Airlines 737 delivery flight to ferry antibiotics and pain killers to El Salvador.

Since that inaugural flight, more than 1 million pounds of relief supplies have been delivered to people the world over. The generosity of more than 50 airlines has allowed the program to send supplies to people in more than 21 countries.

Sixteen U.S. international relief organizations, including several based in the Pacific Northwest, have participated in the program.

Kathleen Ellsworth, Boeing's International Relief Delivery Flight Program manager, says the program owes its success to airline customers who allow Boeing and the relief agencies to load their airplanes with relief supplies.

"Our customers really deserve our gratitude," says Ellsworth. "Without them and the work of so many people who care, we couldn't make this happen."

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